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Sisters

Alexandra M. Kokoli

“Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women far more than a chapter in cultural history; it is an act of survival.”¹

For women artists, retrospectives matter more – and differently. In *When we Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision*, Adrienne Rich specifically addresses the importance of reviewing and revising the canon as an enabling activity for women writers. Yet revision is equally necessary within a body of work such as Judy Chicago’s, not only for new interpretations to become possible, but also for the tracing of a feminist history, a tradition of politics and art practice that resists canonisation. This essay responds to the survey exhibition of Chicago’s work at the Ben Uri Gallery, London (11 October 2012 to 3 February 2013). In doing so, I am evoking the increasingly accepted notion that exhibitions are not only the product of scholarly research but a visual form of it and that, as such, exhibitions engender new knowledge and put forward arguments. Moreover, instead of just a celebration of personal achievement, this group of works charts a journey through four decades by Judy Chicago as well as, more broadly, women artists in the age of the feminist waves. The wider relevance of this journey is highlighted by the inclusion of works by other artists but is also evident within Chicago’s oeuvre itself: the fact that we now have a developed vocabulary at our disposal that allows us to meaningfully use classifications such as “vaginal iconography” is testament to the profoundly transformative impact that the work of Chicago and her contemporaries (“work” in the sense of artistic outputs as well as the labour of resistance) has made on art history, theory and practice.

In this survey exhibition Chicago finds herself in interesting company: a company of dead and living women artists, but certainly not an explicitly feminist community. Louise Bourgeois, Helen Chadwick and Tracey Emin have all either kept their distance from women’s movements or at the very least have shown an ambivalent attitude towards them. In this sense, the intertextual or comparative potential of this exhibition lacks the solid ground of a shared politics but enjoys the advantages of experimentation. Venturing beyond the rubric of “feminist art”, this group of works allows for unexpected, even seemingly superficial correspondences that, probed further, reveal hidden depths. For instance, self-portraits as cats (by Chicago, Bourgeois, and Emin, the latter not included in the exhibition) at once allude to the linguistic connotations of “cat” and its synonyms with woman and female body parts, and suggest subversive, specifically female totemic possibilities. For Chicago particularly there are clear links between the subjugation of animals and patriarchal oppression, as she playfully explores in *Kitty City: A Feline Book of Hours* (2005, cat no. x). The intertextual connections between different works and women artists included the exhibition revisit the question of a womanly aesthetic based on gendered embodiment and the common experience of the oppression of women and repression of the feminine. And

this, of course, is an intrinsically feminist question. The quality of this exhibition's dialogic bridges are reminiscent of what Griselda Pollock terms "the virtual feminist museum", creating "a feminist space of encounter", which "is about argued responses, grounded speculations, exploratory relations, that tell us new things about femininity, modernity and representation".² Juxtapositions blossom into correspondences, encounters give rise to insights, here not just about femininity but about feminism too, its mutually transformative encounters with art practice and its living legacies.

The invitation to Judy Chicago's 1971 show at California State College, Fullerton, which also appeared as a full-page ad in *Artforum*, shows her in a ring dressed in full boxing gear (cat no. x), staring down both the camera and any past or future viewer that dares return her gaze. This openly confrontational attitude becomes all the more significant considering the announcement at that same show of the artist's new freely chosen name "Judy Chicago", having "divest[ed] herself of all names imposed upon her through male social dominance." The performative dimension of women's anger has been a topic of great interest in second-wave mostly American philosophy and linguistics. For Marilyn Frye, anger constitutes an instrument of cartography in the realm of identity and, for this reason, a valuable feminist strategy. It is through anger at patriarchal boundaries, limitations and prohibitions that the range of possibilities of what women can be and do is carved out: claiming the right to anger paves the road to women's rights.³ Anger also emerges as a potential bridge between explicitly feminist politics and the everyday frustrations of women living in a postfeminist world. In the words of Tracey Emin: "I do have big arguments about an artist's work and I do find myself saying 'Yeah, but from a woman's point of view...' I wrote an article recently about masculinity and after I'd written it I went to bed and had the best fucking sleep I've had for years. And I realised how angry I am."⁴

Emin's relationship with feminism is famously complicated and deeply ambivalent. The persistence of connecting threads between art and life may be read as ultimately individualist, but cannot help passing through an eloquent sketch of located intersectional identifications, touching on class, race, gender and sexuality in the context of late 20th c. Britishness Like Chicago, Emin views her life story as intrinsically significant not just to herself but to other people, especially women. Instead of (or, at the very least, in addition to) indulging the wildly popular and populist, richly mediated exhibitionism of the era of reality television, Emin regards the key life experiences that dominate her oeuvre as simultaneously personal and collectively resonant, if not political. These include but are not limited to her ambivalence towards pregnancy and motherhood, her vulnerability to sexual exploitation and abuse as a teenager, her psychologically and physically traumatic treatment by the National Health Service when she sought an abortion and her experience of racism growing up in a small seaside town as the daughter of a dark-skinned Turkish Cypriot father. *Top Spot* (2004), a film following the trials and tribulations of a group of teenage girls growing up in Emin's home town Margate, was pulled from general release when the British Board of Film Classification awarded it a certificate 18, to the artist's great consternation. Emin explained that a BBFC certificate 18 meant that the film's intended audience, teenage girls like those portrayed in the film, wouldn't have access to it anyway.

For Judy Chicago, autobiography presents a point of intersection between personal history, the history of a people, social history and art history, in all of which she emerges as an active

agent. *Autobiography of a Year* (1993-1994, cat no. x) includes a characteristically primitivist self-portrait, in which the female body is nearly split in half by a labial fissure, running from her genitals up to her heart, which is decorated with the Star of David. There is a pronounced and deliberate ambiguity between wound and womb: the woman/Jew/artist survivor is scarred but also highly prolific, giving birth to words and artworks and also to herself, in a continuous cycle of self-renewal. While most of Chicago's autobiographical discourse, be it written, visual or scripto-visual, as in the case of the *Accident Drawings* (1986, cat no. x), can be described as straightforwardly narrative and accessible to a non-specialist audience, Emin's evocation of her life story is equally accessible but turns out to be quite complicated, camouflaged behind a façade of flooding, uncensored and uncontrollable immediacy: "The case of Tracey Emin [...] both mimics and questions the notion of autobiography's authenticity, teasing the public as well as the art establishment about the limits and possibilities of the artist's re-presentation of the 'real' life in autobiographical acts and about the woman artist's essentialized narcissism."⁵ In some ways, the woman or women in Emin's expressionist monoprints couldn't be more exposed. "Her work is both frontal and confrontational",⁶ but also, significantly, highly and purposefully mediated. The artist uses a nervously and simply drawn figure as a stand-in in the works that reference – not reproduce – her own narratives of her most traumatic life events – an everywoman in pain but also defiant and proud for having made it through. In *Monument Valley* (1995-97, cat no. x), a large-scale photograph linked to a series of live performances in the US in which Emin read excerpts from her – always autobiographical – artist's book *Exploration of the Soul*, the "real" Emin remains elusive. Is she the craftswoman who pieced the lettering on her storyteller chair, originally belonging to her grandmother, we are told, now used by the artist to tell stories and telling its own tales of family life, through Emin's intimate fabric inscriptions? Is she the fragile girl of the book's poetic text, whose life is narrated in quasi magic realist style, from conception to the beginnings of puberty? Or is she the aloof, perhaps indignant young woman, directly gazing into the lens despite the strong sunlight, vaguely reminiscent of the insolence of a young Judy Chicago in the boxing ring? In both cases, a symbolic artist's birth is being staged, or the rebirth of a woman as a woman artist. As in all birth fantasies, violence is a big part of the picture: identities flicker between unity and separation in the anxiety-inducing imminence of rupture. It comes as no surprise that the original version of *Monument Valley* bore the title *Outside Myself* (1994).⁷

An important commonality between Emin and Chicago (which, interestingly, neither Helen Chadwick nor Louise Bourgeois shares) is the widespread hostility and even outright dismissal by which their work has been critically received.⁸ Both are often branded as "bad" artists for their perceived formal shortcomings and tendencies towards literalism and are condemned for an odd combination of embarrassing, un-artistic earnestness and, in the case of Tracey Emin, cynical media savvy or, for Judy Chicago, unbecoming (even anti-feminist) ambition. Their popularity with mostly female audiences is significantly held against them. Chicago's supporters have been written off as "fans",⁹ while Emin's success has sometimes been attributed to her aptitude and willingness to play the role that she was tacitly assigned in the cultural context of late 20th century Britain. "She is the British art world's very own postmodern primitive", Julian Stallabrass wrote in 1999 and again in 2006.¹⁰ Since and despite such dismissals, Emin and Chicago have also received numerous accolades and even become establishment figures of sorts – with a difference. This

difference at least hinges on, if it isn't entirely caused by, their sexual difference. However specific to each artist and their work, the critical discourse of dismissal and derision targeted at Chicago and Emin also reveals pervasive anxieties around art practice informed by feminism, feminine aesthetics, and the barely charted territory of female artistic success.

Regarding Chicago's pastel-coloured lithographs such as *Peeling Back* (1974, cat no. x) and foreshadowing *Butterfly Vagina Erotica* (1975, cat no. x), Barbara Rose describes the representational strategies of Chicago, Rosemary Mayer and Miriam Schapiro as "worshipfully allud[ing] to female genitalia as icons – as strong, clean, well made, and whole as the masculine totems to which we are accustomed. [...] By depicting female genitals, women artists attack one of the most fundamental ideas of male supremacy – that a penis, because it is visible, is superior."¹¹ The historical significance of visually challenging the Freudian truism that equates women's external genitals with nothingness and feminine sexuality as a lack to be temporarily and passively filled cannot be denied. On the other hand, vaginal iconography always ran the risk of an essentialism that binds women to their anatomy and biology, and that assumes a knowable and universal female identity on that basis. The risk was arguably worth taking.¹² It is yet important to point out that Chicago's representations of female genitalia do not all have the same result of turning flesh into sanctified, or at the very least sanitised, icon. One of Chicago's contributions to *Womanhouse*, *Menstruation Bathroom* (1972, cat no. x), and its companion piece, the infamous lithograph *Red Flag* (1971, cat no. x), indicts the taboo of menstruation as a patriarchal instrument of oppression that instils self-hatred within each human female. Specifically, *Menstruation Bathroom* contrasts the pristine white bathroom suite with its contents of unused and used sanitary products, thus exposing the paradox of a sexual division of labour that imposes the task of domestic cleaning on those deemed to be at least periodically unclean. In Chicago's *Womanhouse* performance *Cock and Cunt Play* (1972), a farce about gender-normative roles, misogyny takes the literal and extreme form of violent murder. Tracey Emin's endlessly, almost obsessively, repeated graphic renditions of female genitalia are more akin to the pre-iconographic Chicago of the very early 1970s: "maudlin" and offering "an 'unedited' incorporation of the remains of a messy sex life, as a fantasy of a (nearly) unmediated encounter with the artist herself".¹³ Furthermore, the word "cunt" in Emin's oeuvre proves "excitingly multiple", crossing the whole spectrum of "affirmation, celebration, punchy frankness to unpleasantness".¹⁴ Emin's text work *C.V.* (1995, cat no. x) embeds her novel unpacking of the familiar acronym as "cunt vernacular" into its more conventional meaning of "curriculum vitae", suggesting that a woman's life is inescapably lived in and defined by her over-determined, complex, maligned and pleasurable embodiment.

In the (female) body, the literal and the metaphorical are constantly at play as a result of its cultural over-determination. In the performance *In the Kitchen* (1977, cat no. x), Helen Chadwick and three other female performers are dressed in costumes made by Chadwick herself that "represent kitchen appliances, such as an oven in which the cooking rings resemble a breastplate."¹⁵ These comically awkward and, at times, vaguely unsettling hybrids recall the deceptively and subversively domestic environments of *Womanhouse*: the rooms of this imaginary house revise and remake (or, rather, unmake) the sphere of domesticity by recasting it from the increasingly disgruntled perspective of the home-maker. *In the Kitchen* muddies the distinction between cook and cooker by presenting an

oddly anthropomorphic, stout appliance accompanied by a softer, domesticated version of the robotic Maria from *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927). The fridge-woman, on the other hand, looks disturbingly more like a body dump than either a woman's living body or an appliance.

The notorious *Piss Flowers* (1991-2, cat no. x) made from casts of Chadwick's and her male partner's urine imprints in the snow, teasingly challenge expectations and hierarchies on many levels. First, the work provocatively transfers the outcomes of childish horseplay, pissing in the snow, into the more or less hallowed space of the gallery, in which the "flowers" are sometimes displayed on astroturf, as if in an imaginary (and stinky) garden. Second, it reverses the anticipated visual appearance of male and female "flowers", the latter having a more phallic shape, since urine from a crouching female body hits the snow from a shorter distance and with greater force.¹⁶ Most importantly, *Piss Flowers* obtusely participate in and subvert the project of vaginal iconography, by indexicalising the embodied vagina, by turning representation into trace, being into action and its consequences, then freezing them in time and turning them into humorously base and beautiful artefacts. The index is the class of sign that is directly and physically influenced by its object, like a footprint or a thermometer. In this sense, the index constitutes "the limit case of the sign, itself evidence of the struggle of thought to master the world,"¹⁷ which in the case of the *Piss Flowers* specifically translates into a persistence of the baseness of materiality and particularly flesh, diversely explored throughout Chadwick's career. The simplicity of the original concept and process jars with the contextual and interpretative possibilities of the work. It could even be argued that these mock-flowers/indices of a primitive form of mark-making allude to feminist debates and controversies about the politics of the representation of the female body, and especially genitalia, and the threat of essentialism versus the embracing of its strategic potential. At once acknowledging and sidestepping such divisive dilemmas, *Piss Flowers* show us a glimpse of a topsy-turvy world where phallic hierarchies are ever so light-handedly reversed, suggesting that they were probably a little absurd to begin with.

Bodies and buildings, protective and confining dwellings and containers, and bodies *as* buildings, as in the series *Femmes-Maisons* (*Women Houses*, 1946-47), proliferate in the work of Louise Bourgeois. Known for taking liberties with the cultural investment of forms with meanings and hierarchies, a substantial part of her sculptural oeuvre reflects on, challenges and subverts the formal parameters of sexual anatomical characteristics and their symbolic connotations from a highly engaged psychoanalytic perspective, while also displaying considerable ambivalence towards Freudian orthodoxies. "If *Fillette* was simultaneously penis and little girl, the flaccid penis of *Sleep* (1967) underlines the femininity of men, through the formal analogy that the work maintains with the female breast."¹⁸ Bourgeois exposes the fluidity of gender identifications and the arbitrariness of the gendering of flesh by exploring the *plasticity* of sex. These objects are neither genderless nor queering but suggestive of a pre-Oedipal lack of differentiation, let alone hierarchies:¹⁹ ungendered, soft, tactile, simultaneously receptive and self-sufficiently folding into themselves. Not only is gender transcended but so perhaps is the human, in a tender celebration of live flesh. According to Paul Verhaeghe and Julie De Ganck, works like *Sleep* are best classified as "chthonic": "In its original Greek signification, chthonic means pertaining to the earth, subterranean."²⁰ Because such works clearly do not participate in the Oedipal organisation of gender and sex, they argue, they cannot be interpreted from

psychoanalytic, gender-focused or feminist perspectives. And yet, in trying to come to terms with the troubled acquisition of one's position in the gender economy, psychoanalysis has persistently striven to map out the mysterious terrain that precedes it. Moreover, the gesture towards transcending gender and its limitations, whether backwards in the direction of personal prehistory, before the compromises and disappointments of language and culture, or towards sketchily charted cyborg futures, emerges as a prominent concern in a typically feminist constellation of agendas. Neither a penis at rest, cosily tucked in its foreskin, nor a full breast, *Sleep* forms a material attempt to imagine the space before and beyond either/or.

The title of this essay, simultaneously facile in its self-evidence and seemingly inaccurate, deliberately evokes sisterhood but only to complicate and displace it: not all four artists are "feminists", nor even necessarily "feminist". After all, the exhibition is no nostalgic celebration of a second-wave ideal, yet nor does it deny that new sisterhoods exist and should be celebrated. The title "Sisters" also provocatively references Brian De Palma's 1973 horror film of the same name, in which a psychotic woman, possessed by the vengeful personality of her dead conjoined twin, commits violent acts of murder and castration. The popular motif of sisters and especially of twins, one of whom is good and the other evil (but there's little certainty which is which), is symptomatic of a widespread discomfort with the exclusive world of female intimacy, in which boundaries are ill-defined and individualism challenged. The uncanny aspects of female sociality in the context of patriarchy have long been explored in second-wave feminist theory, so much so that they have entered the repertory of its discursive motifs. Such uncanniness is expanded and amplified when female sociality gives rise to the creation of women's traditions. It is no longer (or not just) fear of femininity that is at issue, but fear of feminism. This exhibition supports the view that neither fear has been unfounded.

Judy Chicago's aptly contextualised survey exhibition at Ben Uri eloquently illustrates that the author/artist is definitely not one: constantly and self-reflectively changing through the life cycle, evolving in her career, experimenting with an array of media, styles and visual languages, Chicago's body of work is at once diverse and cohesive, or rather interconnected by many threads of different orders, only a few of which were teased out here: autobiography and self-portraiture, vaginal iconography, feminist politics and aesthetics. Furthermore, this multiplicity is reflected in and intensified by the inclusion of works by Emin, Chadwick and Bourgeois. As well as being a solo survey, this group of works opens up into a platform for visual dialogue, akin to a women's dinner party,²¹ or even Chicago's *Dinner Party* (1974-79, fig. x), where the commonality of the questions raised and the divergence of responses given do not appear dissonant. There is strength in numbers: forty years, four artists, a lot of work, an expanding archive of survival and/through art, making and making it. Alongside a playfully vibrant and joyfully humorous strand, the exhibition calls to mind a quality that has been described as demonic,²² a multiplicity that is irreducible, enigmatic, mutable and generative: "My name is Legion: for we are many."²³

¹ Adrienne Rich, 'When we Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision', in *Lies, Secrets and Silence* (New York: Norton, 1979), p. 35.

² Griselda Pollock, *Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 11.

³ Frye, 'A Note on Anger', in *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (New York: Crossing Press, 1983), pp. 84-94.

⁴ 'Quite a Performance', conversation with Carl Freedman, *Tracey Emin: Works, 1963-2006* (New York: Rizzoli, 2006), p. 166.

⁵ Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith, 'Introduction', in *Interfaces: Women/ Autobiography/ Image/ Performance*, ed. Watson and Smith (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), p. 4.

⁶ Cliff Lauson, 'Love is What You Want', in *Tracey Emin: Love is What You Want* (London: Hayward Publishing, 2011), p. 17.

⁷ Ali Smith, 'Emin's Emendations', in *Tracey Emin: Love is What You Want*, p. 28.

⁸ For a summary and analysis of some such criticisms, see (on Chicago) Arlene Raven, 'The Artist Critics Love to Hate', *On the Issues* (Summer 1994) http://www.ontheissuesmagazine.com/1994summer/summer1994_1.php (accessed 21 June 2012); and (on Emin) Alexandra M. Kokoli, 'On Probation: "Tracey Emin" as Sign', *Wasafiri*, vol. 25, no. 1 (March 2010), pp. 33-40.

⁹ Raven, *ibid.*

¹⁰ Julian Stallabrass, *High Art Lite: The Rise and Fall of Young British Art*, revised and expanded edition (London: Verso, 2006), p. 39.

¹¹ Barbara Rose, 'Vaginal Iconology' (1974), reprinted in *Feminism-Art-Theory*, ed. Hilary Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. 576.

¹² Hilary Robinson, 'Reframing Women' (1995), reprinted in *Feminism-Art-Theory*, p. 536.

¹³ Jennifer Doyle, 'The Effect of Intimacy', in *The Art of Tracey Emin*, ed. Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002), p. 114.

¹⁴ Smith, 'Emin's Emendations', p. 22.

¹⁵ Mark Sladen, 'A Red Mirror', in *Helen Chadwick* (London: Barbican and Hatje Cantz, 2004), p. 14.

¹⁶ Mary Horlock, 'Between a Rock and a Soft Place', in *Helen Chadwick*, p. 42.

¹⁷ Anthony Bryant and Griselda Pollock, editors' introduction, in *Digital and Other Virtualities: Renegotiating the Image*, ed. Bryant and Pollock (London: IB Tauris, 2010), p. 7.

¹⁸ Centre Pompidou, 'Louise Bourgeois' (2008), <<http://www.centrepompidou.fr/education/ressources/ENS-bourgeois-EN/ENS-bourgeois-EN.html>> (accessed 26 May 2012).

¹⁹ In psychoanalytic theory, the Oedipus complex stands for the transition between the blissful lawlessness of infancy and early childhood towards full participation in society, ushering in the voluntary subjection of the individual to the moral rules and restrictions of their culture. By extension, this transition also reflects the translation of biological and anatomical sexual differences into cultural and social inequalities.

²⁰ Buenos Aires: PROA Foundation, 'Beyond the return of the repressed: Louise Bourgeois' chthonic art', in *Louise Bourgeois: The Return of the Repressed* (Buenos Aires: PROA Foundation, 2012) <<http://proa.org/eng/exhibition-louise-bourgeois-textos.php>> (accessed 27 May 2012).

²¹ For the symbolic and real significance of women's dinner parties, see 'The Dinner Party', Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta*, 10th anniversary revised edition (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), pp. 11-49.

²² For an elaboration of the links between the demonic and the enigmatic see Jean Laplanche, 'Time and the Other', *Essays on Otherness*, ed. John Fletcher (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 245-246.

²³ Mark 5: 9; cited in Roland Barthes, 'From Work to Text' (1971), in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p. 160.